

What Happens When Leaders Don't Pray?

BY GAVIN ANTHONY

IN “WHAT HAPPENS WHEN LEADERS PRAY?” (*Adventist Review*, Nov. 13, 2003), I dealt with the remarkable consequences of a leader’s prayer according to Exodus 17:8-16. And I pointed out how this applies to all of us who want to influence others for God. But what happens when we don’t pray?

My Background

When I was a teenager, I attended a prestigious private school. My classmates were the children of diplomats and of the wealthiest people in the country. As a student I won scholarships, was the captain of various sports teams, and won awards for everything. I never failed at anything I wanted to do.

When I began working as a pastor, however, everything seemed turned upside down. Within two years I went through a grueling process. After a trip to West Africa, I had to be hospitalized, and as a consequence lost my job. At the same time, because of gossip that seemed to circulate everywhere, I also lost my reputation. Sometime later, the doctors found a problem with my heart that seemed to be the cause of my continual tiredness. Finally, the relationship with my girlfriend of a few years ended. I felt as if God were systematically breaking everything I had to depend on.

The Point of Everything

When everything seemed the darkest, God performed an amazing miracle that completely restored my health and energy. However, some months afterward I found myself complaining to God about my situation. I knew it was sin to

complain when God had been so good to me, but I did it anyway. From that moment on, the energy that God had miraculously given me began to seep away.

For two months I was angry. Finally, I complained one day: “Father, this is not fair. You have taken everything away from me—I have nothing left!”

I wasn’t expecting a reply, but the voice of the Holy Spirit was unmistakable. “Yes,” He replied. “That is the point.”

I was stunned. God wanted me with nothing?

The reason is very simple: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph. 6:12).*

If we try to work in our own strength, we don’t have a chance against a supernatural enemy. No wonder God wants us with nothing, for He wants to fill us totally with heavenly power. As this realization began to dawn on me, my spiritual life transformed. I found a new intimacy with God.

At the age of 33, I was asked to go to Iceland as the conference president. Now I was a church administrator. I had lots of important meetings to lead and plans to create. I was busy doing great things, but as I watched, everything that I seemed to try to do began to fall apart. And I personally began to crumble. After a couple of years I could barely muster enough energy to chair a meeting, and going to church was almost more than I could cope with.

Somehow, I could never work out why. I blamed the pressures—the gossip and criticism that leaders always have to face. But the pressures only increased, and I had nothing more to give.

The Breakthrough

In desperation I began to study the life of Moses. I wanted to know how he dealt with so much pressure.

One day as I was praying, a voice suddenly interrupted my thoughts. “The trials of the past few years have not come because the people have been critical or nasty. They have come because you have not spent time face-to-face with Me.”

Yet again I was stunned as the enormity of it all began to sink in. But God had more to say. “I have allowed you to watch everything fall apart around you so you will know how strong you really are.”

I cried. After learning all these painful lessons years before, how could I have forgotten everything that God had taught me about dependence upon Him? To say that this was a humbling experience would be a gross understatement. But God was absolutely right. I had failed to remain intimate with Him.

And of course, the cost of this failure was high both to me and to those I had been called to lead.

We don't become intimate with God because we read the Bible or pray, though we cannot be intimate with God without these things. The foundation of intimacy is built on an attitude of the heart that propels us toward the person of God. I believe leaders can easily fail because our relationship with God becomes something we squeeze into our diaries, rather than a deep and ever-present craving for the living God in the very depths of our souls.

Moses' Intimacy With God

So how do we develop an intimacy with God that enables us to lead with supernatural power? Let me share what I have learned from the story of Moses.

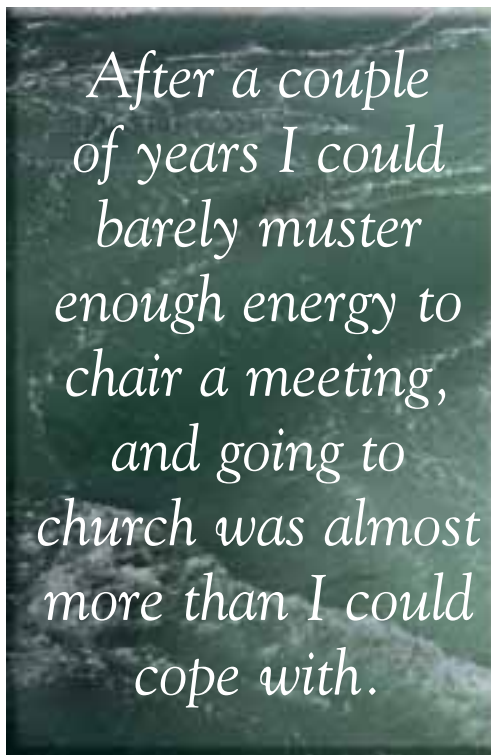
After Israel's spiritual prostitution at the golden calf, God told Moses, “Now go, lead the people to the place I spoke of, and my angel will go before you.” “But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way” (Ex. 32:34; 33:3).

But for Moses, getting to Canaan, even being led by God's angel, was not enough. Moses wanted more than that—much more.

In the conversation that followed, Moses expressed three longings for God. Each longing highlighted what it meant to hunger for deeper intimacy with the Lord. If we want to truly lead people for God while guarding against doing it in our own strength, I believe these longings should become ours as well.

1. *Leaders hunger for an intimacy with God that comes by knowing God Himself.*

When Moses learned that God was



not going to accompany them to Canaan, “Moses said to the Lord, ‘You have been telling me, “Lead these people,” but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. You have said, “I know you by name and you have found favor with me.” If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people’” (Ex. 33:12, 13).

Moses doesn't beg for leadership

skills and success to take the Israelites to Canaan. He begs God to teach him His ways, that he may know and please Him. It wasn't getting there that counted, but knowing God.

However, Moses does not simply want to know about God. In Hebrew thought, to know someone was to have deep and intimate association, so intimate that this word is also used to describe sexual unity. If Moses is to lead God's people, Moses wants to make it very clear that his ability to lead is dependent on his depth of knowing God.

What is the secret of our leadership? How many of us pride ourselves on getting the job done by hard work or having the right talents and training? When God chose Moses, He chose someone who didn't think he had any skills, and thus felt unqualified when finding himself as a leader. But Moses didn't cry, “Help! How do I lead?” But rather, “Lord, teach me to know You!” Knowing God is the source of everything.

2. *Leaders hunger for an intimacy with God that comes by walking in God's presence.*

In response to Moses' desire to know God, “The Lord replied, ‘My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest’” (verse 14). God is going to teach Moses how to know Him by walking with Him. God reveals Himself to us not simply in the transfer of ideas from His mind to ours, but as He walks alongside us. To know God is to walk in His presence.

However, as a leader, Moses is not satisfied with God's presence for himself. Before Moses is willing to move out from Sinai, he wants God's assurance that He will also walk with his people: “Then Moses said to him, ‘If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?’” (verses 15, 16).

For Moses, the presence of God was not something that was quietly assumed to exist. It was meant to be the visible hallmark of the community of God's people, and Moses was not going anywhere without it—even if God was willing to send an angel to get them to Canaan.

What defines success for us? Is simply arriving in the Promised Land our primary objective, or is our focus fixed supremely on the God who has called us to that place? When people look at us and those we lead, is the presence of God the thing that they can't help noticing? Indeed, could there be anything more irresistible to the watching world than the visible presence of God?

3. Leaders hunger for an intimacy with God that comes with seeing God's glory.

Once Moses had received an assurance that God would teach him His ways, and walk with him and his people, "Then Moses said, 'Now show me your glory'" (verse 18).

What do you think Moses expected to see? Moses had already stood face-to-face with God at the burning bush and more recently in the tent of meeting. Was Moses simply searching for the spectacular?

There comes a point in a leader's life when you realize that all the things you thought you had to offer others are actually worthless. Your greatest efforts and your unique skills pale into insignificance compared to the power of our God. And like Moses, we recognize that if God does not show us His ways and walk with us, we cannot lead—for we are nothing.

It is then that leaders find themselves falling on God. The only thing that matters is to see Him, because He, as God, is what matters. It is not simply what God can do that counts, but knowing Him. I believe that is why Moses dared to ask to see the glory of the all-powerful God. He knew that knowing more and more of God was

his only hope, and knowing God would come in the supreme and most intimate way, through a revelation of God's glory. Moses longed to see into the very heart of his Creator, and God revealed Himself to His friend.

The consequence of intimacy with God: Reflected glory. When God appeared to Moses—as to no other man—it wasn't the brightness of the light that surrounded God that caught his attention. It was God's character that Moses wrote about: "And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, 'The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin'" (Ex. 34:6, 7).

And this character had a dramatic effect. Having gained another

assurance of God's continual presence with himself and his people, Moses trekked down the mountain. But "he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord" (verse 29).

That's the inevitable consequence of intimacy with God. Others will see it in our faces, though we will not know it.

Ellen White summarizes the importance of this experience for Moses: "This experience, above all else the assurance that God would hear his prayer and that the divine presence would attend him, was of more value to Moses as a leader than the learning

of Egypt or all his attainments in military science. No earthly power or skill or learning can supply the place of God's immediate presence. In the history of Moses we may see what intimate communion with God it is man's privilege to enjoy."[†]

And this is meant for us too. Another new beginning.

Today, I can so clearly see how my intimacy with Christ is directly and powerfully related to everything I do, and everything I am. I do not pray because it is important. I pray because I am desperate. How can I do anything without the power and direction of the living God? The moment I break my intimacy with my Father, what do I have to offer?

I think I am beginning to understand what Jesus meant when He said,

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

The good news is that no matter how far we may have drifted in our leadership for God, or how tired we are, intimacy with God can be regained. And as long as we remain in Him, we really will bear much fruit.

* All Scripture quotations in this article are from the *New International Version*.

† Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, p. 533.

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